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ABSTRACT

Educators commonly consider praise an example of positive reinforcement. They are correct, but they may also be incorrect because the effect upon students of educators administering praise is influenced by the students themselves. Two situations, at least, exist where praise may not bring about its intended effect. Praise may be inappropriate when it is either perceived to be an evaluation or felt to be undeserved. For those perceiving praise as an evaluation, praise is something that has to be handled or coped with. Praise can also make the recipient feel manipulated. Those receiving praise that is felt to be undeserved must deal with mixed messages regarding their worth and with the perception that the sender of the message is lying. According to some of the literature, superior teachers are characterized by giving, among other things, only limited amounts of praise. Rather than spontaneously punctuating each student's actions with praise, teachers should become more informed, and thus more selective, in their use of praise. (JD)

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Praise: It Beats Getting Hit With a Stick. Maybe!

R. T. Tauber

If there is any one theory of learning that a majority of educators subscribe to, it is the use of praise. From introductory psychology, educational psychology, and teaching-methods courses, to induction-year and in-service programs, the virtues of praise are acclaimed. Today, educators so often use praise in an attempt to modify student behavior that praise appears to have moved beyond the "theory" stage. Who could possibly challenge the value of praise?

There is a danger that educators may begin to treat praise the way we treat a light switch. Want more light? Turn <u>on</u> the switch. Want less light? Turn <u>off</u> the switch. Plain and simple, praise does not always work that way.

<u>Praise: Its Origin</u>

Praise finds its origin in operant learning theory where one's future behaviors are thought to be governed by the consequences of one's present behaviors. If pleasant consequences follow a behavior, that behavior is more likely to occur in the future. If unpleasant consequences follow a behavior, that behavior is less likely to occur in the future.

What consequences are available to educators? As shown in the "Consequence Grid," educators may either SUPPLY a reward (something psychologically or physically pleasant) or REMOVE a reward, or may SUPPLY an aversive stimulus (something psychologically or physically painful) or REMOVE an aversive stimulus. Supplying a reward is called positive reinforcement, removing a reward is called time-out, supplying an aversive stimulus is called punishment, and removing an aversive stimulus is called negative reinforcement. There are no other choices of consequences.

Insert Consequence Grid here

See last page

Where does "praise fit"? When asked this question, educators commonly respond by stating that praise is an example of positive reinforcement. They are correct, but they also may be incorrect. The effect upon students of educators administering praise is influenced, as are the effects of all supplied consequences, by the students themselves. Therefore, it depends upon how the person receiving the praise interprets that "praise." There are at least two situations where praise may not bring about its intended effect.

Situation One - Praise as an Evaluation

Praise may be inappropriate when the receiver perceives it as an evaluation. First and foremost, praise is an evaluation, and most people do not like to be evaluated. Although praise suggests the person being evaluated has met the mark this time, will the person be worthy of praise in the future? What about all the times in the past when the person did not receive praise? Does that suggest he or she had fallen short of the mark?

Praise is often used as a tool by others, including educators, to change someone to better meet THEIR standards. One meets THEIR standards and thus one receives THEIR praise. Praise can be seen as a blatant attempt by one person to manipulate another person. "Undoubtedly, the most threatening aspect of praise is the obligation it puts upon us to be praiseworthy people" (Farson, 1963, p. 63). In a school environment where educators may see it as their duty to evaluate and/or manipulate students' behavior, praise can become an often-used tool--a tool that through its use suggests that students (the sum total of their behaviors) are not acceptable as they are.

Praising a student's good grooming, meaning your standard for grooming, according to operant learning theory is likely to increase that behavior in the future. That is what you want, isn't it? A school filled with students practicing good grooming as you define it would make your world more pleasant. So, is there an ulterior motive for your praise? If so, students will surely pick up on this motive. Students quickly become suspicious of the

motivation behind those who deliver praise, and thus the value of praise when it is unselfishly delivered is also suspect.

Praise, as an educator-applied tool, has other potentially damaging side-effects. Although educators are cautioned to keep a professional distance between themselves and their students, too much distance can be harmful. Offering praise can have the effect of increasing that distance! According to Farson (1963), praise is normally delivered by someone of greater status to someone of lesser status. The teacher praises the student; the student does not praise the teacher. The master praises the apprentice; the apprentice does not praise the master.

The status of the sender is increased by delivering praise, while the status of the receiver may, in fact, be lessened by that same praise. Hence, the gulf in the relationship between the teacher and the student, the basis for effective ongoing communication, grows. The person with the greater status remains in control of the relationship. The person with the lesser status continues to be controlled--and sooner or later he realizes it.

In the terminology of Transactional Analysis (Harris, 1969), the person in control is labeled "Parent"; the person being controlled is labeled "Child." "Parents," as well as teachers playing the role of "Parents," use evaluative and judgmental statements, both positive and negative, to maintain their role. Praise is a favorite control statement of "Parents."

For those who receive praise and perceive it as an evaluation, praise is something that has to be handled or coped with--even

denied! It is just as difficult for many people to handle positive criticism (praise) as it is to cope with negative criticism. Both are clearly criticism; both demand a response. Often that response is defensive.

Listen to people's responses when they receive praise. It makes no difference whether the praise is directed towards an outfit they are wearing, a term paper they have submitted, a curriculum they have designed or, as in my case, a deck I recently built--the defensive responses to praise are the same.

"I really can't take full credit for it."

"You're just saying that, but thank you."

"It's not all that great, look at these mistakes...."

"Gee, anyone could have done as much."

In addition to oral responses to praise, we also exhibit defensive physiological responses. Watch people who are being praised and who view that praise as an evaluation. They blush, their hands turn clammy, they avoid eye contact, their pulse rate increases--all signs that their body is attempting to deal (cope) with praise. Sometimes the best thing that can be said about praise is that it beats being hit with a stick. Maybe!

Is it any wonder that when students are asked which of two forms of praise about themselves they would most believe, praise given to their face or praise accidentally overheard, the majority answer the latter (Tauber, 1986)? Overheard praise is believed to be more sincere, perhaps because it is seen as less manipulative.

Why are we so defensive, even humble, when receiving praise?

I believe it is because, as children, when we accepted praise at face value we repeatedly got burned. Praise very often signaled that a criticism was about to follow as in, "Your paper was fine, but you should..... Keep up the great work." This is known as the sandwich effect: praise-criticism-praise.

Praise often established standards that we, then, were expected to live up to constantly. Take an infant who first used the big-people's potty correctly, was praised, and then was expected to use it correctly all the time. There was real "h---" to pay when the inevitable accidents occurred. Consider the student who earns all "A's" on a report card and then is singled out for praise by his or her teachers and parents. Woe be the student whose grades then fell. This responsibility is the source of great anxiety as students become frightened about the prospect of not being able to live up to expectations (Dreikurs, 1965, p. 43).

Finally, as youngsters, we learned that some of the praise we received was simply a tool others used to make their lives, not ours, more pleasant. Praising a classroom of students for being quiet during study hall makes the teacher's life easier. It also gains teachers recognition among their peers as being an effective disciplinarian. Praising students for typing their research papers makes those papers easier for the teacher to read and correct. Praising teachers for being at their assigned post as students enter the building reduces student disturbances and thus makes the principal's life more pleasant.

Situation Two - Praise When One Does Not Feel Praiseworthy.

It is one thing to receive praise when you think it is deserved, even if that praise often is self-serving for the person delivering the praise. It is quite another situation to receive praise when you do not feel deserving of such praise.

It is ironic that, when one feels less praiseworthy, those around him who care use that very occasion to deliver statements of praise. We all know the saying, "The road to h--- is paved with good intentions." Good intentions or not, praising someone who does not feel praiseworthy is generally an ineffective interpersonal communication behavior. Among those who hold negative opinions of themselves, receiving a compliment that they think is undeserved can lead to a distrust of the sender of the praise (Clarizio, 1980).

Take the child who comes home from school in tears about the fact that she did not get picked for the varsity cheerleading squad. Well-intentioned parents, wanting to help the child, are likely to deliver a statement of praise. They might say, "Well, we think you are the very best cheerleader the school has!"

At this point the child has a dilemma. That dilemma is that someone is lying to her. Either the school's selection committee for the cheerleading squad is lying to her, or her parents are lying to her. One is saying she is not among the best, while the other is saying she is. Who should she believe? Sending praise when others do not feel praiseworthy is what Thomas Gordon, in his book Teacher Effectiveness Training, labels as a roadblock to

communication.

Consider an experienced teacher in the faculty room who says to you with a good deal of emotion, "I just don't think I am cut out to be a teacher. I just can't seem to get my subject across to the kids." Think how tempting it would be for a caring fellow teacher to say, "What do you mean? You are one of the best teachers in this school. Everyone knows that."

Once again someone is lying. Either the troubled teacher's own feelings are lying to him, or his colleague is. Who should he believe--his own feelings or his trusted peer? If he believes his colleague, then he has to question the validity of his own feelings. This is a rather frightening choice to have to make.

Praise is delivered so often in this type of circumstance because we don't have the requisite skills to listen, really listen, to people who are experiencing problems. After all, teachers are supposed to teach and too often that means talk, not listen.

Rather than take the time and the energy to deal with the problems those around us may be facing, we would rather the problems would go away. Praising a person who owns a problem is an attempt, though rarely successful, to make the problem disappear.

Summary

The point of this article is to question the value of using praise when that praise is either perceived to be an evaluation or felt to be undeserved. For those perceiving praise as an

evaluation, it creates a situation where praise must be "handled." For those receiving praise that is felt to be undeserved, one must deal with mixed messages regarding one's worth.

According to Reavis (1988), superior teachers are charcterized by giving, among other things, only limited amounts of praise. Rather than spontaneously punctuating each student's actions with praise, we should become more informed, and thus more selective, in our use of praise (Wolfgang and Brudenell, 1982).

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CONSEQUENCE GRID

	@@@@ SUPPLIES a Consequence	@@@@ REMOVES a Consequence
REWARD (Something valued by ****)	POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT	TIME-OUT
AVERSIVE (Something that causes **** mental or physical discomfort)	PUNISHMENT	NEGATIVE REINFORCEMENT

Key: @@@@ = boss, parent, spouse, teacher, etc.

**** = employee, child, spouse, students, etc.

(Dr. R. Tauber)

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